 these
articles of

ILLEGIB

in terest -

ILLEGIB



ILLEGIB

Keep in latest file
(Vol. 8 - ^{Aug-Dec} 1981)

PORTRAIT ARAFAT, Yasser

ARAFAT: FROM GUN-RUNNER TO DIPLOMAT

As Lord Carrington prepares to meet the PLO chief, Brian Crozier examines the man who has cultivated moderation to earn respectability for his cause

He is squat and paunchy, and orates in high-pitched, staccato Arabic. He has heavy-lidded eyes, an aquiline nose, a short beard and is invariably pictured with three or four days' stubble requiring a skillfully selective shaving policy. He is nearly always seen toting a gun and is never without his Arab head-gear, or *kaffiyeh*, which both proclaims nationalism and (it is said) hides his baldness.

By now, this physically unprepossessing man with his battle fatigues and dark glasses, Yasser Arafat, is one of the most famous people in the world. Whatever his merits as a leader of irregular warriors, he must be accorded genius rating as a PR man, for himself and for the movement he leads, the Palestine Liberation Organisation.

It is not difficult to demonstrate that he is, or has been, associated with PLO groups practising pure terrorism. Yet he achieved the exceptional distinction of being the first non-governmental leader, apart from Pope Paul VI, to address the United Nations General Assembly. And, especially during the past four years, he has gained widespread recognition for the PLO as a quasi-government with which bona-fide governments feel the need to establish diplomatic relations, even though there is as yet no such thing as a state of Palestine.

Clearly a man who can pull off this kind of paradoxical feat deserves attention, and possibly respect. His (original name was Rahman Abdel-Raouf Arafat al-Qudwa al-Husseini), and he was born in Jerusalem in 1929 (although some accounts insist that the year was 1928). There is a useful symbolism in the name "Arafat", which is also a hill south of Mecca which has religious importance.

His father was a prosperous merchant, who later dissipated much time and money trying in vain to establish a family claim to valuable property in Cairo through unco-operative Egyptian courts. To help him in his litigation, he moved to Cairo with his family (including Yasser's sister and two brothers) and opened a small shop there.

It was in Cairo, then, that Yasser Arafat served his political apprenticeship and gained his first experience of war. Politics: while studying at Cairo University (in those days, Fuad I) for his degree in civil engineering, he became the leader of the Palestinian students. War: at 20, he was running guns

for the Arab side in the fighting of 1948-49 which led to the creation of Israel and to the exodus of Palestinians who, collectively, became his life's cause.

Guerrilla war fascinated the young Yasser Arafat, and the prolonged troubles of 1951-52 which drove the British out of the Suez Canal Zone gave him a ready-made battle theatre. Soon he was both training and leading the Palestinian and Egyptian commandos who harassed the British.

After graduating, the young man received more formal training at the Egyptian military academy, notably in the making and utilisation of explosives. It was as a demolitions expert and commissioned lieutenant in Gamal Abdel Nasser's Egyptian army that the Suez Affair of 1956 brought him a fresh opportunity for battle experience, this time fighting the French as well as the British at Port Said and Abu Kabir.

The ill-fated Anglo-French expedition was short-lived, and Yasser Arafat began to think about earning a living. He worked briefly in Cairo, as an engineer, then moved to a land of greater opportunity — Kuwait. There he set up a contracting firm before signing on in 1958 as an engineer with the Sultan's public works department.

There was never any likelihood, however, that Arafat might opt for the obscurity of civilian life: politics and political violence already had him in their grip. While in Kuwait, he edited a magazine, *Our Palestine*, which served as the rallying point for the nationalistic outrage of Palestinian exiles. There too he trained Palestinian commandos for raids inside Israel. In the tradition of revolutionaries, he donned a new name as a cloak for his clandestine work, and it was as Abu Amar that he joined the organisation with which his name is always linked: Al-Fatah.

If Arafat carries an Islamic symbolism, Al-Fatah is full of the symbolism of struggle and violence. It is a kind of reverse acronym of *Harakat al-Tahrir el-Watani al-Palastini* (Movement for the Liberation of Palestine). In Arabic, those initials (HTP) mean death. Reverse them (fath) and they spell conquest.

Even now, some mystery surrounds the birth of Al-Fatah, but it seems that it grew out of the clandestine meetings of the early Fifties. For years it made militant noises but did not act militarily. In January 1965, came its first recorded action. That year

continued on page 45



**Arafat greets Libya's
Colonel Muammar Gaddafi
at an Arab summit
conference in Tripoli
during December 1977**



Arafat the diplomat

continued from page 42

Arafat became a full-time revolutionary, giving up his job in Kuwait to take the leadership of Al-Fatah's fledgling military arm Al-Assifa (The Storm). At that time Al-Fatah remained relatively obscure. The limelight was hogged by the original PLO, which President Nasser had set up at a conference of the Arab League in Cairo the previous year to bring various Palestinian groups together.

Not unnaturally, it was stifled as well as sponsored by the dominant personality of Nasser, who saw it as one of the many instruments of his pan-Arab policy. Two years after Al-Fatah's emergence as a fighting organisation, the PLO was giving little sign of life. Then came the traumatic test of the Six Day War of June 1967. The PLO's army offered battle to the advancing Israelis and was utterly defeated.

It was, of course, in good company, for the armies of Egypt, Jordan and Syria soon shared in the general Arab humiliation. In the prevailing gloom came Yasser Arafat's opportunity. Nasser had set up the PLO, at least in part, to divert attention from Al-Fatah. Arafat, spurning Nasser and Cairo, had made a deal with Syria, which offered bases from which the commandos of Al-Assifa could stage hit-and-run sabotage raids into Israeli territory.

Untainted, therefore, by the defeat of the PLO, Arafat quite suddenly became the stuff of legends. Such was his aura (despite protestations of his distaste for a personality cult) that money and supplies from Arabs began to pour in. And so did volunteers.

It was during this heady period that Arafat showed his capacity for strategic thinking. He aimed to unite the Palestinians, whatever their ideologies, under his banner. And he saw the achievement of Palestinian statehood as the natural culmination of a protracted struggle in which neither the Israelis nor the Arab world, from the Gulf to the Atlantic, would ever be allowed to forget the Palestinian cause.

The first of these aims took him a couple of years to realise. He made an uneasy alliance with Dr George Habash, the extreme Left-wing leader of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). And Al-Fatah joined the demoralised PLO.

Twice, Arafat challenged the established leadership of the PLO. His first attempt, during the PLO's fourth annual conference in July 1968, failed, when he attracted only 38 of the 100 votes in the council elections.

Next time round, in January 1969, he swept the board. Three months later Arafat formed the Command of the Armed Struggle. Initially, the independent-minded Habash stayed out of it. But in February 1970, the PFLP also joined what was restyl-

ed the Joint Command. Since then, Yasser Arafat's leadership of the Palestinian militants has never been seriously challenged. Which does not mean that the shifting and proliferating Palestinian groups invariably seek his authority before acting.

The fact that Arafat does not necessarily control every group which ostensibly looks to him for leadership has helped him to cultivate and maintain, with surprising success, a reputation as a moderate. Equally, it suits the more unequivocally extreme of the

It is the genesis and the structure of Black September that shatters Arafat's moderate credentials

Palestinian groups that the spokesman, diplomat and "travelling salesman" of the PLO should have a moderate image.

It is quite clear, to give an example, that Arafat and Al-Fatah had nothing to do with the spectacular actions of the PLFP in 1970, when it hijacked airliners and dynamited aircraft on an airstrip outside Amman.

The moderate credentials of Yasser Arafat need, however, to be looked at with some care, and a good point to start the search is with the shattering events of 1970 in Jordan. In that country and in Lebanon, the fedayeen (meaning those ready to sacrifice their lives for freedom) had become a state within the state. There were some 20,000 fedayeen in Jordan and 4,000 in Lebanon. After desultory clashes with the Lebanese forces in April and October, Arafat negotiated a precarious truce.

In Jordan, the situation ran wild. There were clashes between the fedayeen and the Jordanian army in February, and again in June. King Hussein was in a conciliatory mood. In August, however, he backed tentative plans for negotiations between Egypt and Israel, and the fedayeen made the major error of attempting to take over Amman and other Jordanian cities.

There had to be a showdown, and the

fedayeen were no match for the well-trained Bedouins of the royal forces, with their utter contempt, as desert Arabs, for the effete, town-dwelling Palestinians. The fedayeen were badly mauled in 10 days of bloody fighting in September and on the 27th Arafat was forced to sign a face-saving truce with King Hussein. *(origin of name Black Sept)*

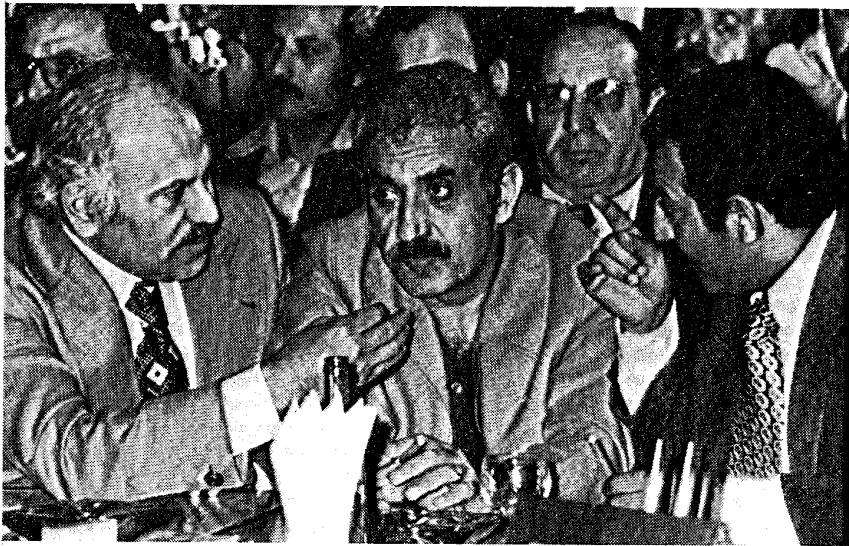
The statistics of fedayeen operations tell the story eloquently. In 1969, they totalled 490; in 1971, only 26; and in 1972, no more than 10. The Palestinians had been smashed, not by the Israelis but by fellow-Arabs.

Out of the trauma of 1970 a new group was born, the most extreme of all: Black September. It is, however, the genesis and structure of Black September that shatters Arafat's moderate credentials. Black September was spawned, in December 1970, by Al-Fatah's intelligence network Jihaz al-Rasd, itself controlled by two men: Abu Youssef (the *nom de guerre* of Mohammed Youssef Najjar) and Hassan Salameh. Both men, along with eight other fedayeen, all from Al-Fatah, had attended an intelligence course in Cairo in 1968, where they had learned all about firearms and explosives, espionage and the recruitment of spies, and sabotage.

These two men, and one other, Salah Khalaf (also known as Abu Iyad), became the leaders of Black September. Full details of the history and organisation of the group came out when a fourth man, Abu Daoud, was arrested in Jordan in February 1973 while on a Black September mission to kidnap Jordanian ministers. Had he succeeded, the ministers would have been held as hostages to secure the release of fedayeen in King Hussein's jails. Instead Abu Daoud, who had been recruited by Salameh in Kuwait five years earlier, broke down under interrogation and confessed all he knew.

At that time, Najjar continued to run Jihaz al-Rasd for Yasser Arafat, with Salameh as one of his assistants. Najjar and Salah Khalaf also served on the central committee of Al-Fatah, under Arafat's chairmanship. In the wider Palestinian organisa-

continued on page 46



Advice for PFLP leader George Habash who formed an uneasy alliance with Arafat but continued his extremist actions. He is now partly paralysed

Arafat the diplomat

continued from page 45

tion, the PLO, Najjar's name again occurs, on the executive committee elected in Cairo on January 13, 1973, again under Yasser Arafat's chairmanship.

To say that Arafat did not personally run Black September, even if it is postulated that he did not approve of their more horrific deeds, and to argue from this that he is a moderate is pure sophistry. If Arafat had disapproved of Black September, it was open to him to have Khalaf, Salameh and Najjar expelled from the organisations under his direct control, or at least to denounce their deeds. He did neither.

For the record Black September organised the murder of Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games in 1970; the assassination of the Jordanian Prime Minister, Wasfi Tal, in Cairo in November 1971; the hijacking of a Sabena airliner at Lydda airport; and the abortive raid on the Israeli embassy in Bangkok. It was also responsible for sabotaging oil installations in West Germany and Holland in 1972, and for the explosions at Trieste in the same year.

What does Yasser Arafat stand for, and what does he want? It is not easy to answer either question with any precision. When he entered militant politics, he had no discernible ideology, and no motivation other than Palestinian nationalism. As chairman of the PLO, however, he has put his name to statements that included Marxist turns of phrase. Too much should not be read into this however: the PLO includes Marxist groups and Communist infiltrators, but there has never been any evidence that Yasser Arafat is among them. In public, he professes to aim at an independent Palestinian state which would be a liberal democracy, with equal rights for Moslems, Jews and Christians. The question is whether his Marxist followers, and especially his Soviet backers, would allow any such thing. He is often asked what would happen

to Israel if the Palestinians did get their sovereign state. His answers can be evasive, ambiguous or contradictory (as between one interview and another). But over the years, there is no doubt that his original line has softened.

Article 19 of the 1968 Palestinian National Covenant, the basic manifesto of the PLO, declares that "the partitioning of Palestine in 1947 and the establishment of Israel is fundamentally null and void". Article 20 describes the Jews as "citizens of the states to which they belong," and "not one people with an independent personality".

Arafat does not threaten to "drive the Jews into the sea", and indeed the juridical destruction of Israel to make way for a new state in which the Jews would have the same rights as the Arabs is hardly the same thing.

Arafat's real change of line, however, is that he now talks of two alternative solutions: either the replacement of Israel by a state of Palestine; or the setting up of a Palestinian state on "any part from which the Israelis withdraw". Interestingly, there is some evidence that the Soviets (who were among the first to recognise Israel in 1948) talked him out of any solution that would involve the destruction of Israel. A decisive

year in Yasser Arafat's biography was 1974. In August that year, he led a PLO delegation to Moscow and was invited to open a PLO office in the Soviet capital. Important to note, he was not received on that occasion by Soviet government representatives but by a KGB front, the Soviet Afro-Asian Solidarity Committee.

The Soviets do not lightly invite a fighting organisation to open an office in Moscow. The rule is that it signifies a decision to provide all-out assistance. So it was when the Vietcong's political wing was invited to open up shop in Moscow in November 1964. Eleven years later, with massive Soviet military aid, the Vietnamese Communists were in Saigon. At this rate, a Soviet-style Palestine could be with us in 1985.

In November, still in 1974, Yasser Arafat was invited to address the UN. A few days later, the Assembly voted to recognise the PLO as "the representative of the Palestinian people". Not long after, the same body condemned Zionism as "racist".

Since then, Arafat has gone from triumph to diplomatic triumph. He has been received (officially) by the former Spanish Prime Minister, Adolfo Suárez, and (as a personal guest) by the Austrian Chancellor, Bruno Kreisky. But perhaps the most significant of his successes came in June, when the European summiters in Venice decided that "the PLO will have to be associated" with any negotiations on peace between Israel and the Arab States.

For this bachelor of 51, who neither smokes nor drinks, and who once said that he had "married a woman called Palestine", these must have been welcome words — even though the PLO officially criticised the Venice statement because it did not go far enough. Certainly Arafat has travelled far since his gun-running days in 1948.



Arafat in Iran with the Ayatollah's son, 37-year-old Ahmad Khomeini (left), and President Bani Sadr

REX

NOW! APRIL 3, 1981



